

# *A Very Merry Christmas*





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CHRISTMAS



by  
MARGARET MARY DUNN

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In order to stem the tide of secularism and materialism which certain opportunists inject into every Christmas season it is not necessary to go to the other extreme and assume Puritanical austerity.

Christmas ought to be merry. We ought to be happy and light hearted. It is a feast day of great importance. Man has every reason for celebrating this day of days with all the gladness his heart can hold.

Only the worldly and the cynical say, "I'll be glad when it is over," or believe that Christmas is no longer anything more than a time of costly and meaningless exchange of gifts.

Christ's birthday meaningless! Not unless we have lost sight of Eternity and the hope of everlasting love. For Christmas is the promise of Eternity. It is God's promise that all suffering will end, all inequalities one day be righted, all sorrows one day turned to joy.

The Christmas message of the angels brings no more hope to the rich than to the poor, to the fortunate than to the unfortunate.

God encompassed and reached every soul on that first long ago Christmas. To the poor He gave the privileged shepherds as proof of His tender, abiding love for the poor and the humble. To those blessed with the prestige of this world's goods He gave the Three Kings—that they might study their hearts and learn the way to true greatness and goodness.

All of life, and all of living, is in the story of the first Christmas. It is in every Christmas, and nothing can take the true and perfect

Christmas spirit from us but our own proud, unbending hearts. We have only to imitate Mary and Joseph to find the essence of what Christmas joy should mean.

Mary and Joseph accepted Christmas as Almighty God saw fit to send it to them. They didn't spoil it with vain longings for riches they did not have, or with bitterness of heart because there were those around them more abundantly blessed with the gifts of the world. Their rich friends came bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were gifts of the heart because they were offered with love. As such, Mary and Joseph accepted them gratefully and graciously.

Then they themselves went to the temple and offered their gift, two turtle doves. It was the gift of the poor. They offered this gift without apology or shame. They were giving what they could afford.

Thus was established the pattern for all Christmas giving. Give what circumstances permit, give with a loving heart and unabashed spirit. It's pride, human vanity, and trying to put a price tag on love, which spoils the spirit of Christmas giving and makes hearts bitter instead of merry. But Christmas giving starts first of all with gifts to God. The gift of a pure conscience, the gift of prayer, the gift of friend to friend, family to family, and Santa Claus to child.

There is nothing pious or righteous about wanting to take the joy and glamour out of Christmas. In fact, to do so would be to set the country back a hundred years or more. For Christmas was once a grim and bleak affair in America. That was in Puritan New England, and when Christmas was not a happy, gladsome holiday — speaking of the country as a whole — it was not a holy day either. When the Puritans suppressed all



Christmas festivities it did not lead to greater spiritual dedication to the Nativity. Crowds did not stream to their churches on Christmas Eve as they now do to ours. There was less brotherly love, less tolerance, less charity, less desire to understand one another than there is today when we string our streets with lights, drop coins in Santa's kettle and fill the air with music.

What if some of this is for commercial purposes only! Hasn't it, nevertheless, made Christ's birthday our most widely acclaimed and celebrated national holiday? No small thing to be grateful for in a pluralistic society with large numbers of people who have had no religious training whatsoever, and another large segment whose religious beliefs do not accept christianity. At least everyone knows what the Nativity is! And Christmas engenders such a great outpouring of good will that our world is definitely a better place for all

of us because we are engrossed with thoughts of it. Its beauty so stirs our hearts that we are prompted to reach out beyond ourselves to the fullness of the spirit. Even the most hurried and worried do a bit of soul searching, and every year at Christmas time there is revealed to us such goodness of heart that it often wipes out misunderstandings of the past.

So what if our approach isn't perfect? Its the nearest we come to perfection all through the year. That men try is the really important thing. And every Christmas brings its own miracle. Someone, somewhere, who raised his eyes to the Star of Bethlehem just for the day, is touched by the grace of God and henceforth makes his Christmas good will a lasting way of life. As long as this is true, there is always the hope that one Christmas Day will find all hearts united in one immense chalice of brotherly love.

Will it bring this day any closer if we become too critical and too intolerant of what others do in the way of Christmas customs and traditions? Will we really draw souls closer to Christ if we ridicule and rebuff their honest efforts to recognize Christmas within their limitations and if we make them self-conscious and defensive about the differences which separate us?

Holy Mother Church does not attempt or hope to convert the world overnight. But moves with prudence and moderation. We, of the laity, who would be apostolic must also learn to temper zeal with kindness and forbearance. This applies to seeing irreverence and disrespect in every sprig of holly and mistletoe, every touch of modernity in every Santa Claus.

Instead of frowning on all the festivities which are apart from our church observances

of Christmas we should acquaint ourselves with the religious significance they hold and spread a proper understanding and respect for them, for what they mean to the Christian who believes that His God and Redeemer was born on Christmas Day in Bethlehem.

For instance, every gayly ornamented Christmas tree shimmering in its pool of iridescent balls and colored lights, and so familiar to Americans, owes its beginnings to the religious customs brought to this country by its early immigrants. The Christmas tree as we know it came from Germany. The lights on it and the lights we use in our windows are steeped in religious tradition.

The evergreen tree was originally the "Tree of Paradise." It dates back to the Middle Ages and to the season of Advent, specifically, when scenes from the Bible were dramatized as pageants within the churches.

These pageants were called mystery plays. One of the most popular of these was the Paradise Play. It enacted the creation and fall of Adam and Eve and closed with the promise of the Redeemer to come. For this play an evergreen tree was used. From its branches apples were hung, one of which Eve would pluck and hand to Adam.

Gradually, the purity of these sacred plays was destroyed as certain abuses crept in, and Church authorities finally banned them in the 15th century.

This ban led to the private practise of having a Tree of Paradise in the home. The tree was set up on December 24th, though it was actually in veneration of Adam and Eve.

On the very same day the Tree of Paradise was put up another custom was observed. One which had its roots in the ancient liturgy which represented Christ as the "Light of the World" by the symbol of a burning candle.

The Germans put this candle, or sometimes, candles, on wooden shelves which had the shape of a pyramid. They decorated the shelves with balls, tinsel, holly twigs and usually a star on its top for the star of Bethlehem.

In the 16th century someone began the custom of combining these two—the Tree of Paradise and the Christmas candle. The wooden shelves were discarded and the star, the balls, the tinsel and the candles were transferred to the tree, which was still hung with apples. As time passed other edibles were added in the nature of candy, cookies and sugar plums. Eventually, small presents were hung on the tree as well. This is the Christmas tree as it was brought to our shores by the first Germans to immigrate, and the history of its religious background and spiritual significance.

This Christmas tree was brought into Puritan New England where all Christmas festivities were banned, where men were required to work, and children to attend school, on Christmas Day. It was set up in the homes of the first German settlers as a family observance.

At the same point in time the Irish immigrants were illuminating the night of Christmas Eve by their ancient custom of placing a blessed and lighted candle in the window to welcome the Holy Family and to invite the Christ Child to enter their hearts and homes.

With this understanding of the Christmas tree and the symbolic meaning of the lights we now use in such generous profusion it becomes perfectly clear that the need and obligation is not to discourage these practices but to try to spread a proper respect for them that their true meaning may be known to all and kept alive for future generations.

There is a lesson to be learned from the history of these customs too. It is the lesson of patience and good example when we wish to win others to our way of thinking and doing. The way of our ancestors, who kept the Faith in their own homes and in their hearts first of all, with such steadfastness and such a degree of fervor it even melted the hearts of the stern Puritans. Who were certainly much less disposed to religious tolerance than most people are today.

The crusade to put Christ back in Christmas was a badly needed reform, and it succeeded remarkably well because it was carried out in a manner calculated to do the most good without offending anyone. It did important things in an impersonal way, at such top level that personalities were not involved. Unfortunately, many well meaning people, wishing to participate in this splendid Catholic Action are doing so with narrowed vision.



They are too quick to frown on what is harmless gaiety, and even proper merriment.

Some will always be in a position to do more than others to restore a true sense of values where needed. But for most of us the example of a good life is the best contribution we can make. Just doing ordinary things in such a supernatural way that our lives become a testimony to the grace of God within us.

There is such a longing for peace in the world today, such a need for peace in men's hearts that any way of life which thus casts its shadow of peace on the world will not want for followers. So if we make of life an open book of brotherly love, charity, kindness, harmonious living, good will and steadfast devotion to all that the Babe of Bethlehem taught man, then we are serving Christ and His Church in everything we do and say. He will

then be in every bit of tinsel, every shining ball, every gift and every Merry Christmas friend calls to friend across the barriers of race and creed.

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